5-6-2016

Millennials of the Church

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation


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Over the last two decades, there has been a noticeable shift in the theological and liturgical views of young, adult Catholics. Merriam-Webster defines a Millennial simply as “a person born in the 1980s or 1990s.” Although a large number of millennials are not affiliated with or have left a major religious tradition, many Catholic millennials are becoming increasingly attracted to traditional and orthodox views on liturgy and ecclesiology. The definition of orthodox is “conforming to established doctrine, especially in religion.” While understandings of traditional liturgy may vary, we will understand “traditional” liturgy as conforming closely to the official liturgical norms and customs of the Catholic Church. Despite some early research on the phenomenon, the trend toward tradition and orthodoxy is a relatively new. Consequently, a significant amount of research on this topic is lacking. Although the liturgical trends and preferences of millennial Catholics are at the

Abstract - Over the last two decades, Catholic millennials have become increasingly attracted to traditional and orthodox views on liturgy and ecclesiology. Several factors play a role for this increasing trend. Though some Catholics view it with skepticism, the movement towards traditional expressions of faith remains a strong force in the Catholic Church. This paper attempts to explore this phenomena.
heart of this topic, it cannot be viewed apart from larger religious trends among this age group. A closer examination of these trends show considerable diversity. While the movement toward traditional belief, devotion, and practice is considerable, there remains a significant amount of young adults who may prefer contemporary expressions of faith, and who may not live in accordance with church teaching. A number of scholars, as well as some older generations of Catholics, have viewed this movement with skepticism. Despite criticism and a lack of research on this topic, the movement of millennials toward traditional views is becoming increasingly evident in Catholic parishes and universities across the country.

The trend toward traditional expressions of faith among millennials has been concerning to some older generations. The attraction to older forms of devotion, including the Latin Mass (henceforth known as the Extraordinary Form,) has been difficult to understand. Some authors, including Tim Muldoon, a theologian from Boston College, feel it may be a “conservative response” to the Second Vatican Council and its liturgy.\(^4\) The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and the spread of modernity have had a profound effect on the way people view religiosity.\(^5\) Richard Cimino, a specialist in religious sociology, feels the 1960s generation’s restlessness, sense of open horizons in lifestyle, and social experimentation paved the way for a mood marked by limits, especially as these experiments did not often live up to their promise.\(^6\) The spirit of reform in the church happened alongside the Cultural Revolution, especially leading up to and during the Second Vatican Council. The baby boomer generation at that time was just as active as any generation before them,\(^7\) although there has been a significant decline in religiosity since then. Cimino further found that 85 percent of baby boomers feel that going to church was not necessary for being a good Catholic. Because of the progressive landscape that developed
at this time, it is not surprising that this generation would be concerned by this significant shift and a “return to tradition.”

An unfortunate byproduct of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council has been an increasing polarization between various segments of believers. Richard Cimino believes that young people who are returning to more traditional forms of Catholicism have inhabited the divided Catholic landscape of doctrine and practice after the council. He also says that the council sought to meet the modern world by updating the church’s teachings, although many feel that the changes have gone too far. Cimino continues by saying that the legacy of the 1960’s has become empty churches, schools, and seminaries. The result has been intense division between the so-called “liberal” and “conservative” sides of the church, which Cimino describes as a “battlefield” of American Catholicism. He feels that the center of the conflict between liberal, conservative, and traditional Catholics is whichever party they feel best represents the Catholic tradition today. It appears that a number of Catholic millennials are now seeking a true expression of faith, rather than something that reflects a political party. With older generations of Catholics looking at millennials with suspicion on account of their ecclesiastical and liturgical views, we must seek further ways to bring unity and reconciliation to these groups, rather than continuing to promote division.

Acknowledging what appears to be a strong movement among millennial Catholics, there remains an overall decline in church attendance and religiosity among young adults. Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist from Princeton, attributes this to several factors, including: family life, marital status, children, employment patterns, and education. Together, he considers these factors to be a “cumulative effect.” In fact, Wuthnow demonstrates that the strongest effect on church attendance is marriage. In order to
provide a better understanding of this movement as a whole, as well as the similarities and differences between Catholic young adults and those from other religious traditions, we will survey statistics of young adults from a broad number of traditions.

Young adults comprise a significant number of most major faith traditions. In Robert Wuthnow’s study, aside from those listed as “other faith,” Catholicism displayed the largest number of young adults. Following Catholicism was Black Protestant, Evangelical, and Mainline Protestants. Still, he found that younger adults make up a smaller proportion now than they did a generation ago. Among all faith traditions, there has been a significant amount of decline in traditional religiosity, church attendance, and adherence to church teaching. Concerning prayer, University of Notre Dame professors Christian Smith and Patricia Snell found that 42 percent of young adults say they pray daily or more, compared to 76 percent of those who are over 75 years old. There is an overall decline among younger generations who pray daily or more. The sharpest decline is among Mainline Protestants and Catholics, followed by Black Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Mainline Protestants. For those who say they are “strong” adherents of their religious tradition, young adults represent 27 percent, while older adults represent 53 percent. The greatest increases in those who never attend religious services are among Jewish, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics, at 38, 28, and 25 percent, respectively. Among those who identify as “not religious,” young adults represent 20 percent. This number declines as age increases. The oldest adults account for 10 percent of this group. Interestingly, Smith and Snell found that the largest shift from belief to unbelief is among young adults who were Mainline Protestant as teenagers.

Amidst depressing reports of sharp decline in attendance and prayer exists a bit of hope. Among young adults 18-25 who
believe in life after death, the largest percentage is Catholic, followed by Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Black Protestants. The amount of Catholics who believe in life after death has been increasing since at least 1970, and has shown a sharp increase over the last 15 years. It is quite interesting to observe amidst declining numbers of participation, especially among young Catholics, that there has been a sharp increase in those who believe in life after death. This appears to be an indicator of greater hopefulness and faith among this age group. While this is difficult to measure, this is evidence that although the amount of young adult Catholics is declining overall, those that remain have greater, if not increasing faith.

Smith and Snell observed considerable diversity among the religious beliefs of young adults. They have observed that young adults of many denominations are gravitating toward more traditional beliefs. They further found that when mainline Protestants leave their faith tradition between their teenage and young adult years, they are likely to become either more conservative, or leave religion altogether. At the same time, they also found that young adults who were conservative, Mainline Protestants, or Catholic as teenagers showed the largest decrease in weekly or more attendance at worship, with declines of 31, 31, and 26 percent respectively. While young adult Catholics are listed among the greatest numbers of decline, their decline is the smallest of these three groups. One may observe a bit of conflict in these numbers. On one hand, the argument is that young adult Catholics are becoming more traditional and faithful, yet at the same time they are among the largest numbers declining. One can deduct from this information that overall there is decline, yet the young adult Catholics who remain or convert are more faithful than their Protestant counterparts. This corresponds to a statement by Pope Benedict XVI, who stated, “From the crisis
of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a Church that will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning.” This also corresponds to a controversial quote attributed to him calling for a “smaller, purer church.” Still, some research is critical of the evidence of growth among Catholic youth. Robert Wuthnow feels the decline among Catholics may be greater than reported, and that numbers have been bolstered by immigration. In a blog post by Fr. Michael Driscoll from the University of Notre Dame, he agrees that there is a lack of substantial data to back up the claims of an increase in young adults in the Church, regardless of their liturgical and ecclesiological preferences. Ultimately, he feels there is not enough data to substantiate the claim of traditionalism among young adults. To be sure, the movement toward traditional expressions of faith is not the only movement among young adult Catholics. Still, when surveying the pews of Catholic parishes and young adult ministries, this movement cannot be ignored.

Richard Cimino observes that, in stark contrast to the earlier trends, a more individualistic process of choosing parishes and groups to fit individual need is replacing Catholics who belong to parishes within the boundaries of their neighborhoods. Furthermore, Catholics no longer view their faith in familial terms like “once Catholic, always Catholic.” Rather, importance is placed on correct belief and spiritual vitality. Cimino also found that modern young adult Catholics are not hesitant to criticize bishops and priests who they do not feel are orthodox. For Cimino, this is a distinctly modern notion, as criticizing a bishop was once a sign of heterodoxy. In addition, while there has been a strong post-conciliar emphasis on community, young adults do not want to belong to a tightly knit community as much as they wish to find a set of beliefs and authority that have stood the test of time. In Colleen Carroll’s book The New Faithful, she found that not all young adults
are unified in their beliefs. Similarly to Smith and Snell, Carroll noted that some may prefer traditional worship, but may not believe in the conventional morals and theology that come along with it. She found that young adults may follow orthodox leaders like St. John Paul II, but may not follow the church’s teachings on personal morality. The diversity in views of young adults is particularly noticeable in matters of sexuality. Robert Wuthnow found that of young adults who felt that premarital sex was “always wrong,” Catholics were the lowest percentage next to Mainline Protestants, Nonaffiliated, and Jewish traditions, respectively. He also found that of young adults who reported sexual activity, the largest percent groups were those of Jewish, Black Protestant, Catholic, Mainline, and Evangelical Protestants. It is worth noting that the percentage of those who feel premarital sex is “always wrong” and those who have been sexually active in the last year was surprising. Although young adult Evangelical Protestants were the largest group who felt premarital sex was “always wrong,” only 43 percent felt this way. Over 70 percent of young adult Evangelical Protestants—the smallest group—reported sexual activity. Catholics clocked in at nearly 90 percent. Considering the Catholic Church’s teachings on sexual morality, these numbers are concerning indeed.

Even amidst possible concerns about the morality of millennials, the shift toward traditional liturgy remains clear. Tim Muldoon feels that young adults return to Catholicism and symbolism because there is something in it they find attractive. He feels that young adults latch onto Catholic symbols like devotions, interest in architecture, or Latin because of its immediate interest—speaking to them in a unique way with meaning they have not previously experienced. Muldoon has made note of what many young adults have experienced: that the postmodern world has eroded a sense of mystery. He feels that the celebration of the liturgy in this context
can be refreshing. He explains that modern science has challenged theological truth, making it obsolete, and that it has retreated into a discreet corner of the university. Muldoon calls the sense of wonder of the modern world a “casualty,” and that good liturgy must cultivate a sense of mystery because it shows young adults that the world cannot be easily explained, giving them reason for hope.²⁶

A significant number of young adults appear more interested in traditional expressions of worship. Their views are occasionally considered “conservative,” although this term is often used pejoratively in modern culture. For the sake of this exploration, we will consider the term “conservative” along the same lines as traditionalism and orthodoxy. Colleen Carroll found that two-thirds of teenagers now consider themselves “religious” or “very religious. She also discovered that the renewed vigor of organized religion is found in more traditional forms. Particularly, she found that there were a large number of young adults that were attending the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite.²⁷ It is essential to remember that attendance at the Extraordinary Form is not the only indicator of traditionally minded millennial Catholics. Furthermore, Carroll’s book The New Faithful was written prior to Pope Benedict XVI’s 2007 Apostolic Letter Summorum Pontificum, which allowed for wider celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass as the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite.

Richard Cimino, who has also noticed young adult attraction to the Extraordinary Form, has also observed an increase in traditional and orthodox Catholic publications, publishers, schools, and organizations. It is critical to observe his awareness of this phenomenon as early as the publication of his book Against the Stream in 1997. Cimino feels that conservatives gained greater influence under the pontificate of St. John Paul II. He also cites a number of converts from evangelical Protestantism, including
names like Scott Hahn, who is now on the faculty at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. Cimino cites Steubenville as a University who emphasizes conservative themes while maintaining an evangelical thrust. Colleen Carroll noticed the same phenomenon as early as the publication of her book in 2002. She feels that in order to attract young Catholics, they must imitate the boldness of evangelical fellowship while retaining what makes Catholicism distinctive. Carroll goes on to present Curtis Martin, the founder of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS,) whose search for an evangelical church led him back to Catholicism. At the same time, he developed an appreciation for evangelical attitudes toward scripture and Christ-centered fellowship.

FOCUS stands as an an exceptional example of the movement toward orthodoxy and traditionalism, while maintaining an evangelical and Christ-centered focus. FOCUS’ mission statement is simply, “To Know Christ Jesus and Fulfill His Great Commission.” FOCUS’ further statement “The Main Thing” describes their mission as, “Inviting college students into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church. Inspiring and equipping them for a lifetime of Christ-centered evangelization, discipleship, and friendship in which they lead others to do the same.” At the time Colleen Carroll wrote The New Faithful in 2002, FOCUS was only three years old. At that time, Carroll says FOCUS was found on ten campuses, and boasted of 600 student participants. In FOCUS’ 2015 Annual Report, they boast of 113 campuses (including Saint John’s University,) and 17,530 student participants. In the same report, FOCUS reports 57 vocations to the priesthood and religious life in 2015, and 547 since its inception. FOCUS’ biannual national convention called “SEEK” welcomed nearly 10,000 participants in 2015. SEEK 2013 welcomed 6,100 attendees, and 4,000 in 2010. These numbers demonstrate FOCUS’ fast growth, with an increase
of 3,900 and 2,100 attendees between conferences. The very first FOCUS conference welcomed 25 attendees in 1999. At FOCUS’ 2015 national conference in Nashville, TN, 200 priests concelebrated daily Masses, and 5,500 confessions were heard. Over five days, numerous lectures were given on various Catholic topics and issues, all with a distinctly orthodox tone. The conference liturgies are of note when considering the liturgical preferences of millennials and young adults. Daily Mass was attended by a large number of students and conference attendees. The principal celebrant wore traditional vestments, and six candles adorned the altar. For each daily liturgy, the proper of the Mass was chanted in English, and the assembly sang the principal portions of the order of Mass in Latin. There were two large Masses, including one Sunday Mass. The Sunday Mass featured sung a Latin ordinary, traditional hymnody, and choral polyphony. A large electronic organ was used to the conference center, joined by brass players. The high level of congregational participation must be emphasized, especially the Latin parts of the Mass. The apex of the conference liturgical activity was Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction. Most of the nearly 10,000 participants were in attendance. The event began with a large procession, featuring hundreds of priests and seminarians following an ornate monstrance with a thurible. Traditional Latin hymns were sung for exposition and benediction. Contemporary lighting and technology was used to great effect. A band played Praise & Worship music periodically throughout the entirety of the session. The conference concluded with a large daily Mass. This Mass featured the same band from Adoration, who played Praise & Worship music in conjunction with a sung Latin Ordinary and English propers. The liturgies at SEEK 2015 and the high level of congregational participation conference demonstrate the significant shift toward traditional worship and music among
millennials.

Colleen Carroll has observed three core elements of belief among orthodox young adult Catholics: belief in God’s presence in the sacraments (especially Jesus Christ in the Eucharist,) concern for helping the poor, and a devotion to Mary as the mother of God. Carroll has been heavily criticized for what some feel to be a narrow definition of orthodoxy. However, when observing various aspects of the movement among millennials, these elements are indeed worthy of consideration. Carroll further nuances the definition of orthodoxy using G.K. Chesterton, who simply uses the Apostles’ Creed. Carroll explains that the embrace of traditional religion and morality begins with a rejection of relativism. This rejection can be viewed as a response to the remnants of the 1960s Cultural Revolution considered earlier. This movement can be seen as a response to what has been called the Dictatorship of Relativism by Pope Benedict XVI, who preached on this topic nearly three years after the publication of Carroll’s book. Pope Benedict discusses how having a faith based on a Creed is now often labeled “fundamentalism” by those who oppose the church. On the contrary, relativism appears to be the only way to respond to modernity. Carroll considers the attraction to Christian orthodoxy among young adults to be qualitatively different from that of their peers and parents, who seek spiritual growth while rejecting organized religion. She feels that young adults who are attracted to tradition in worship or spirituality want to understand the underlying reality of the tradition in order to transform their lives. Carroll notes how young adults differ significantly from their grandparents—baby boomers—who either inherited a religious tradition, or were placed in a society that endorsed their world-view. She further notes that young adults have never had the luxury of accepting orthodoxy without critical reflection. This is a critically important aspect
of the movement. In earlier generations, especially prior to the Cultural Revolution, orthodoxy was the norm. Religious tradition was not viewed with suspicion as it commonly is today. It may be that the contemporary and counter-cultural search for orthodoxy is shrouded with a similar curiosity and romanticism that surrounded the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

Colleen Carroll believes that young adults have a hunger for substance. They are disenchanted with the moral relativism of and materialism in popular culture. Young adults are seeking a church that offers the fullness of the gospel and worship that connects them to a sense of mystery of God’s presence. Furthermore, they are seeking time-tested teachings, and a sense of the transcendent. They have often been poorly catechized, and have heard more about social issues than the foundations of their own faith tradition. These factors have inspired young adults to seek historical Christianity, which attracts many evangelical Protestants to Catholicism—even children of former Catholics. This search has inspired a search for traditional Christian devotions including, Liturgy of the Hours, the rosary, Eucharistic Adoration, and even the Extraordinary Form of the Mass. She quotes Phyllis Tickle, who calls this “a need to go back to mystery.” However, Carroll notes the same phenomenon observed by our other contributors, that some young adults who prefer traditional faith and liturgy do not necessarily subscribe to all of the morality and theology that goes along with it. Similarly to Cimino, Smith and Snell, and Wuthnow, Carroll also noted that this movement crosses denominational lines.39

One of the most important factors of this young adult movement is a personal encounter with the Lord. Colleen Carroll says that this movement boils down to an encounter with God that defies description. It has been an important part of conversion for many young adults.40 This stands in strong contrast to earlier
movements in the church, which were centered on community and social justice. Despite the importance of these movements, they often placed individuals or notions of community above God. One of the strongest devotions along these lines is the practice of Eucharistic Adoration. The resurgence of this movement among young adults has seriously confused older Catholics. However, considering the intense prayer and emotional experiences surrounding this devotion, including those observed at a FOCUS conference, this attraction is understandable. Adoration is a real encounter with the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. Colleen Carroll mentions that older Catholics associate this practice with a sense of rigidity and piety that was eagerly disposed of after Vatican II. Because Adoration has been unknown to younger generations, it is exotic and appealing. Although Tim Muldoon sees devotions like adoration as a “conservative response” of the Vatican II liturgy, he notes that these practices are counter-cultural responses.41

A surprising aspect of this millennial movement has been an attraction to the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite. The attraction to the Extraordinary Form has absolutely confounded older generations, who felt the Liturgical Movement and the post-conciliar liturgy were a triumph. Tim Muldoon feels that the Extraordinary Form is important among young adults because they do not perceive it the way their grandparents may have—that it is far better than when they were children.42 Richard Cimino cites an increase in attendance at the Extraordinary Form long before Summorum Pontificum in his book published in 1997. He notes a contemplative tradition and “sense of the mystical” that draws many new young adults. In an article from Latin Mass magazine, he finds the enthusiasm of the Extraordinary Form of post-Vatican II Catholics to that of pre-Vatican II Catholics. The movement toward the Extraordinary Form has been very controversial. In the
book *Toward Ritual Transformation*, Robert Hovda says, “Some young people are naively longing for an imaginary ideal time before the reform experienced by their parents.” Peter Kwasniewski, however, mentions that the serious young people he has met are hungry for the mystical, the numinous, the “different,” and the sacred. He says these young adults are thirsty for symbolic ritual.

A critical response of this young adult movement is from those who are suspicious that young adults are moving away from Ordinary Form altogether. Even though his exploration is largely of the Extraordinary Form, Kwasniewski is sympathetic to the Ordinary Form. He commends those that are trying to bring together the best of both worlds, admonishing young Catholics not to scorn the reform of the reform, for it is also capable of leading souls in the right direction. It is precisely this idea that acknowledges the call of Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter *Summorum Pontificum* to allow for a mutual enrichment between the forms of the Roman Rite.

Music plays a major and often controversial role in the life of liturgy. This has been a hallmark of the young adult movement. Many young adults have been critical of the liturgical music they have grown up with, and are becoming attracted to more traditional forms of music. The FOCUS liturgies presented earlier demonstrate the renewed interest in Gregorian chant, organ, polyphony, and traditional hymnody. Robert Wuthnow has observed this trend in a variety of religious traditions. Wuthnow notes the number of people and age groups who would like to attend worship services with contemporary music. From most favorable of contemporary music to least, Wuthnow observes the following age groups: 40-45; 30-39; 46-64; 65-97; and finally, 21-29. This places the millennial age group as the least favorable to contemporary worship music. He further elaborates that only one-tenth to one-quarter of young adults would like experimentation with contemporary music in worship. In his
doctoral dissertation, Skye Hart has also observed this trend among young adult Catholics and feels it will help preserve the presence of traditional music, especially the pipe organ. Some may notice a bit of contradiction here when observing the cult of Eucharistic Adoration, which often features contemporary Praise & Worship music. However, a more detailed observation of this phenomenon shows that some young adults seem to separate devotional activity from the Mass. This was demonstrated at FOCUS’ SEEK 2015 conference, where chant, organ, polyphony, and traditional hymnody was used as the principal music for the Mass, while contemporary music was used primarily for Eucharistic Adoration.

The movement of many millennials toward traditional expressions of faith has become a strong force in the religious landscape of the United States, especially in the Catholic Church. While older generations are sometimes confused or suspicious of this movement, it appears that it is inspiring a new generation of faithful Catholics.

Skepticism and suspicion is possible from anywhere in the Church. We must find ways to reach out to one another in love and charity, ministering to one another as Jesus, who calls us to this faith in the first place. There has been a demonstrated loss of transcendence, mystery, depth, and substance in our tradition. It must be recovered in a Christ-centered and organic way. It must reach out to all areas of the church without becoming narrow minded or exclusionary. It must inspire the faithful to go out to serve the poor, the hungry, those who suffer, and all those who are in need.

A great deal of time has been spent discussing the Extraordinary Form of the Mass. Some members of the generations of Catholics have been critical of this Form of the liturgy since it was formally reintroduced and normalized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007. While it has been decried as divisive by various figures in the church, I would like to encourage a mutual enrichment of
the forms, as influenced by Pope Benedict. A further look at the liturgical trends of U.S. Catholics, especially young adults, has shown a movement away from community-inspired forms of church, in favor of churches that suit needs of individual Catholics. There is now a great need to find unity in our solidarity with one another as members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Inspired by Pope Francis, millennial Catholics have a great zeal and evangelical spirit, which is perfectly in line with the New Evangelization initiated by Pope St. John Paul II. In a time where the church is experiencing great decline, we must unite with each other in prayer and liturgy, answer the call of Jesus, and follow his call to seek the lost, heal the sick, provide for the poor, and welcome the weary.

Notes:


7. Ibid., X.

8. Ibid., 4.
9. Ibid., 36.
10. Ibid., 23.
12. Ibid., 73.
14. Ibid., 100.
15. Ibid., 125.
16. Ibid., 111.
17. Ibid., 117.
20. Wuthnow, Baby Boomers, 85.
22. Cimino, Against the Stream, 36.
24. Wuthnow, Baby Boomers, 141.
26. Ibid., 133.
28. Cimino, Against the Stream, 6.


38. Ibid., 62.

39. Ibid., 65.

40. Ibid., 40.

41. Muldoon, Seeds of Hope, 132.

42. Ibid., 110.


45. Ibid., 138.


47. Wuthnow, Baby Boomers, 224.
48. Hart, Skye. 2010. *Cecilia’s Mirror: The Role of the Pipe Organ in the Catholic Church of the United States in the Aftermath of Vatican II.*